

2019

History of Lewiston Maine

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History of Lewiston

A BRIEF HISTORY OF LEWISTON

by Local Historian Douglas I. Hodgkin

In 1768 the Pejepscot Proprietors, a Boston-based land company, granted to Jonathan Bagley and Moses Little of Newbury, Massachusetts, land on the east side of the Androscoggin River at Twenty-Mile Falls. They were to settle fifty families there and to build a road to connect with the road from Topsham. The place was named

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"Lewistown," apparently in honor of the late Job Lewis, a Boston merchant and former Proprietor.

The first white settlers in Lewiston, Maine, were Paul Hildreth and his family in 1770. His log cabin was a short distance below the falls near the location of the Continental Mill. Although the cabin burned and his family had to spend the winter in New Gloucester, they returned in the spring. Hildreth operated the first ferry about half a mile below the falls. Several families followed. By the first census in 1790, Lewiston's population was 532 persons. The residents sought incorporation as a town and received their charter February 18, 1795.

Active members of the board of selectmen in the early years included Winslow Ames, Joel Thompson, and Dan Read. The latter also served twenty years as town clerk and forty years as the first postmaster. In the 1840s and 1850s, particularly influential members were William R. Frye, Ebenezer Ham, Mark Lowell, and Stephen Read. Throughout Lewiston's status as a town, several members of the Garcelon family also served as civic leaders.

Water power was harnessed relatively early, as a dam was built of timber by 1808-1809 and a canal was made. In 1809 Michael Little built a large wooden building with saw, grist, and fulling mills next to the falls. This was burned in 1814 by an arsonist, but new mills soon took its place. The town grew slowly, reaching 1549 inhabitants by 1830. Because most were farmers, the population was widely dispersed. The first bridge was built in 1823, but most of Lewiston Falls Village was on what is now the Auburn side of the river. While there were mills by the falls, what is now downtown Lewiston still was the Harris Farm, a few dwellings, and a school house.

In 1836 local entrepreneurs, primarily the Little family, organized a company to build dams, canals and mills, but they lacked the capital to achieve their goals. The company became known as the Lewiston Water Power Company in 1848 and was taken over by the Franklin Company in 1857. As late as the 1840's what is now Lisbon Street was undeveloped, but the community soon changed. Boston investors, including Benjamin E Bates, financed the construction of the canal system and several textile mills. Many Irish immigrants were employed in the construction, under the supervision of Capt. Albert H. Kelsey. These mills prospered during the Civil War, as the owners correctly foresaw that the war would be long; they had stockpiled sufficient cotton to maintain production.

Many people moved into town from the surrounding countryside. Mill owners constructed tenements to provide supervised housing for Yankee farm girls who provided much of the early work force and then to accommodate the

rapid influx of population. These blocks were located along Canal, Park, and Oxford Streets right across from the mills.

The 1850 census showed a 99% jump in one decade to 3,584 people and then a 107% increase to 7,424 in 1860. A premier hotel, the DeWitt, was built about 1854. The growing city attracted in 1855 the establishment of Maine State Seminary, which later became Bates College, chartered in 1864.

After Lewiston became a city, Jacob Barker Ham took office as the first mayor in 1863. He was followed by William P. Frye who went on to serve in Congress, including the position as President pro tem of the Senate. In that position, Senator Frye was twice next in line for the presidency due to vacancies in the office of Vice President. Alonzo Garcelon, who served as mayor in 1871, became governor of Maine in 1879. His son Alonzo Marston Garcelon was mayor in 1883 and served twenty years on the education board. Daniel J. McGillicuddy served three terms as mayor and a term in Congress.

Central Block on the corner of Lisbon and Main Streets became the anchor for development of the downtown area and housed city offices. Lisbon Street became the main commercial center. A new impressive city building was constructed in 1873 across from a park donated by the Franklin Company; after an 1890 fire, the current city hall replaced it.

After fire destroyed several stores on Lisbon Street, leading citizens decided to construct "the best opera house east of Boston." The Music Hall was built in 1877 at 69 Lisbon Street. The offerings here, at the Empire Theater, and in many other halls generally featured traveling stock companies, minstrels, drama and melodrama.

Lewiston and Auburn constructed a railroad spur from Lewiston to the Montreal-Portland railroad line. The Canadian National Railway thereby gave competition to the Maine Central Railroad and freight rates dropped. The Grand Trunk Station ("The Depot") on Lincoln Street became the arrival point in the 1870's and after for the migration of thousands of French Canadians to Lewiston. They settled in the area between Lisbon Street and the river, many in blocks built by the mills or in an area called "Little Canada." The rapid in-migration helped to raise the population to 19,083 by 1880. In forty years, the city had grown tenfold.

St. Joseph's Church was constructed on Main Street. The Dominican Block on Lincoln Street was a religious, political and cultural center. It housed the first parochial school, established in 1882-1883. The teachers were Sisters of Charity (Grey Nuns) until the Ladies of Sion arrived in 1892. St. Peter's Church was the French parish, replaced by Sts. Peter and Paul, built 1905-1938.

City services expanded rapidly during the last half of the nineteenth century to accommodate the growing population. Several schools were built including the Frye Grammar School. The city established a normal school to train its own teachers in what is now known as the Dingley Building. Lewiston High School opened in 1850 and moved into a brick building on Main Street in 1859. It later occupied the Jordan School, then a building on Central Avenue, and now a comprehensive high school in Franklin Pasture. St. Dominic's High School was founded in 1941 in the clubhouse of L'Association St. Dominique.

Other city services included a fire company organized in 1849, the Manufacturers and Mechanics Library Association, a city park granted by the Franklin Company in 1861, a water works authorized in 1873, a franchise granted for a horse railroad in 1881, a municipal electric lighting plant, and the extension of the city water system to Lake Auburn in 1899.

Under the direction of the Grey Nuns, St. Mary's, the first hospital was dedicated in 1889, which moved to the new building on Sabattus Street in 1902. The original Central Maine General Hospital was established in 1891 with thirty beds in two houses on Main Street.

In the early twentieth century, notable mayors included Frank A. Morey who became Speaker of the Maine House; Robert J. Wiseman, the first Franco-Canadian mayor; Louis Jefferson Brann, who established a municipal coal yard and a public swimming pool and playground, and became Governor of Maine in the 1930s; and Harold Newell Skelton, who achieved completion of the high school on Central Avenue. For the next four decades, each mayor had a French name, including Jean Charles Boucher, who also had a lengthy career in the Maine legislature.

After almost eighty years of amendments, the city charter had become unwieldy. Finally, corrupt practices provided the impetus to adopt a new charter in 1939, consisting of a mayor, council, a powerful Board of Finance, and several other commissions. The city moved to a more professional system with the adoption in 1979 of a new charter that established a city administrator and abolished most boards and commissions.

The development of Lewiston's suburbs responded to the American desire for the independence of home ownership. Throughout the twentieth century, population expanded outward from the city center. Industry began to gravitate to more suburban locations. American Electro Metals at 1560 Lisbon Road in the 1930's became North American Philips in the 1940's, the predecessor of Philips Elmet Corp., which has expanded substantially. The Lewiston Development Corporation, consisting of local business leaders, raised funds to construct a building to attract the Geiger Brothers

printing concern that produces "The Farmer's Almanac." Other businesses have located in industrial parks, and shopping centers have opened.

Competition from the South and abroad led to the closure of most of the textile mills. The city is developing new uses for these structures. The population in Lewiston has stabilized at around 40,000 in each census from 1940 to the present. Further growth in the region has continued in the neighboring towns. Lewiston continues as a vibrant city that reflects its increasing economic, cultural and social diversity.

By: Douglas I. Hodgkin

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